Chapter 2

The Justifications of War
in the Qur’ān

Introduction

A number of Qur’ānic verses address the relationship between the Muslims and their enemies during both the Meccan and Medinan periods discussed in chapter one. In the Meccan period, over one hundred and fourteen verses command Muslims to forgive their persecutors and be patient in the face of the religious oppression and execution of some of their fellows. In the Medinan period, however, certain verses give the Muslims permission to defend themselves in the face of aggression from the Meccans. In several of the Medinan chapters of the Qur’ān, many verses address the Muslims’ struggle with their enemies and some of these verses command the Muslims to fight the enemy.

This chapter considers the Qur’ānic texts that address the issue of war. It discusses the interpretations of these texts in some of the most influential classical and modern Qur’ān exegeses, specifically the exegeses of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), Rashīd Riḍā (1863–1935), and Sayyid Qūṭb (1906–1966). The exegetes’ interpretations reflect their understanding of the nature of the conflict between the Muslims and their enemies. More importantly, these interpretations provide the basis of the *jus ad bellum* (the justifications for resort to war) in the tradition of war formulated by the Muslim jurists, as shown in chapter three. Therefore, the aim of the present chapter is to discover the ways in which the Qur’ān justifies warfare.
and to investigate whether the Qur'ān sanctions offensive war in order to propagate Islam.

Muslim scholars have developed a number of exegetical disciplines for the study of the Qur'ān, some of which have crucially shaped Muslim understandings of the Qur'ānic position on war. Using these exegetical disciplines and in the light of their diverse understandings of the Qur'ānic position, Muslim scholars, specifically the jurists, have formed the Islamic laws regulating the relationship of Muslims with others.

However, Fred McGraw Donner concludes that “we [Western scholars] are not in a position to catalog unequivocally the main elements contributing to the way [emphasis added] Muslims thought about war and its limitations... The reason for this is mainly a practical one: too little preliminary work on a vast subject.”1 Moreover, Andrew Rippin notes that the science of Qur'ān exegesis “still remains a vast, virtually untapped field of investigation [in Western scholarship... because unfortunately] Orientalists continue to gloss over its importance as a historical record of the Muslim community, as revealed in comments that declare the material to be ‘dull and pettifogging’ and the like.”2 These statements succinctly diagnose some of the problems that arise in the study of the Islamic tradition of war in outsider literature. Despite the importance of the subject and the vast literature on it, many areas and methodologies that contributed to the development of the Islamic law of war still remain largely underexplored. That is to say, quoting certain Qur'ānic phrases or verses or even an exegete’s interpretation of such phrases or verses, or worse, simply depending on translations of the Qur'ān, to explicate the Qur'ānic position on war, merely adds to the confusion in the area. But to find out both classical and contemporary Muslim understandings of the Qur’ānic position on war, the best approach is to examine the exegetical disciplines that the exegetes themselves apply.

It is important to note here that it is generally characteristic of Islamic scholarship that Muslim scholars, whether exegetes, jurists, or otherwise, were all individual researchers who worked independently without any formal relationship with state authorities, except when scholars accepted the position of qādi (judge). Moreover, as H. A. R. Gibb notes, they “were hesitant or unwilling to become involved in the practical affairs of government.”3 Their works present their individual intellectual efforts to conceive an Islamic framework for relating to others in times of peace and war. Their frameworks derive from their readings of the injunctions found in the Qur’ān and the Sunnah (tradition) of the Prophet. It is undeniable, however, that these scholars were influenced, throughout Islamic history, by the sociopolitical conditions of their times.4